

//trans.beta// Once, Before a Mission

Dim reflections on the screen.

Standard red emergency lighting creates strange shadows on the bulky metal frames and pipes that protrude from the walls and the heavy-duty fire extinguishing equipment, waiting to be deployed.

This is the main cargo bay, filled with the usual roar of turbofan engines and ever-present slight vibration.

One hour before the assault.

The ARX-7 "Arbalest" was locked in its standby position behind its guard rail. In the cockpit, a silent Sousuke seemed to be completely absorbed by whatever he was reading. The file was displayed in one of the MFDs, and he was looking through it with an extremely serious expression, silently nodding to himself.

It was not, as one may have thought, the plan of the operation, but the summary of a previous class in classic literature. A soldier usually spends a lot of time simply waiting, and by using that time to study, Sousuke managed to avoid failing his classes.

One particular model sentence caught his attention, and he re-read it several times.

"Furuike ya kawazu tobikomu mizu no oto..."¹ [1]

...it jumped into the old pond, so what? "I don't get it, at all..." God knows how many dozens of times he muttered that sentence when studying for classic literature. In his homework he only wrote down a literal transcription of the meaning of that sentence, but the teacher said that this wouldn't do, and that it expresses something much more important. He then shrugged, and wrote:

"The frog jumped into the pond, making a splash. That splash startled the new recruit in a squad on a covert operation, and he fired his gun. Because the shot was heard from afar, the operation was a failure, and the support unit suffered heavy losses."

¹ Possibly the most famous haiku out there - the "frog poem" by Matsuo Basho. Roughly translated as "The old pond; A frog jumps in - The sound of the water." Though there are many, many possible translations.

The teacher then shouted "Are you trying to be funny?!" and smacked him with his notebook. He wasn't trying to be funny, though, on the contrary - he was always serious. He started thinking that maybe he himself, and the way he was raised, was the problem. Maybe he did not have any talent for it, and it could only be understood by someone whose brain worked in a certain way. He could understand mathematics and chemistry quite well - why not ancient literature?

- What is not understandable, Sergeant, Sir? - a melancholy voice interrupted his thoughts.

It was, of course, the machine AI, whom everyone called AI. This wasn't the first time that it had reacted to his monologue even without him pressing the voice command input switch.

- None of your business. Be quiet.

- If it is about the contents of the file, index number R-630c, that you are currently viewing, I have a suggestion.

- It's classic literature, what would you know...

- I can explain. It is a three-verse fixed poetry form from medieval Japan. It does not simply represent a collection of facts, rather suggesting certain ideas and associations. It rejects abstruse, overly complicated poetical language, instead creating images that have a direct relationship with human psychology, - it really is a masterpiece.

Sousuke guessed that the AI was absolutely right, - and he had spent an hour thinking about this poem.

[- I hope you will recognise my superior linguistic capabilities.]

- You just connected to the net and looked it up, haven't you.

[-But of course. It is logical to use any intelligence available.]

- Among students, this is considered cheating.

[- I have used the datalink to the best of my ability, why is this "cheating"?]

- Because you cannot train your own abilities this way.

[- I see,] AI's voice sounded a little haughty, or maybe it was just Sousuke's imagination. [Then, please, come to your own solution, and do not rely on my help.]

- When did I ever rely on you, dammit?!..

He was interrupted by laughter over the comm channel. It was Kurz Weber, sitting in his "Gernsback" near Sousuke's machine.

- Is something wrong, Kurz?

- Sure is! You talking with that AI, for instance...

He must have heard their conversation because the internal comm channel was open.

- I don't really understand where you're getting at...

- No, seriously - it sounds like you and Kaname. AI's the perfect funny man for you. And you're the one losing face here.

[- I am honoured to hear your praise, Urz 6.]

- See? Heheh, - over the radio Sousuke clearly heard that Kurz could barely contain his laughter.

Sousuke didn't understand completely what his friend was referring to, but it was clearly not flattering.

- Are other people's troubles that funny? - answered Sousuke coldly. - With your temper, if you were in my situation, you'd already be swearing like a drunken sailor. Because you don't have enough control.

- Wha-at? - Kurz sounded seriously offended. - I'm a sniper, man, and you say I've no control?

- You have a practised arm, that I know. Whether you're a real sharpshooter, that is a different matter...

A sniper had to have a certain level of control and mental fortitude, as well as superior intellect and sound judgement that was much higher than that of an ordinary person. That is what Sousuke's words referred to.

- And by the way, all snipers I have met before joining Mithril never bragged about their profession. They would modestly say "I can also shoot", at most.

Sousuke's words rang true, as they were based on his experience as a mercenary. They were, however, sufficient to hurt the pride of the person who was considered the best among their sniper specialists. The stress that has been accumulating in him finally spilled over, and a comrade in arms became the target, - neither of them realised it then.

- You ungrateful bastard, - said Kurz in a very cold voice, - so I'm not a real sniper, eh? Never mind that I saved your sorry ass many times over? And always clean up the mess you make? You should be thanking me, and what do I get?..

- I don't remember asking you to.

- You got some nerve... next time you better watch your back. Bullets don't always come from the front, you know.

- They can come from wherever they like. I will deal with any enemy, in front of me or behind me, in melee.

Kurz let out a derisive laugh.

- Heh, want to try it, then?

- What?

- I'm always watching, and there practically no enemies that try to sneak behind you. Now, if for some reason, I were to commit a mistake when choosing my target, all it would take is a light touch of my finger...

Kurz's M9 turned its head ninety degrees, towards its neighbour. A rarely used laser sight extended from its head sensor array. An alarm sounded in the other machine's cockpit, as AI intoned "Warning. Lock on by E-006".

- Bang! - the laser vanished. - It would really be an easy victory. Your movements are uniform, and your feints predictable. To think that someone like you is the vanguard of our team... sheesh, Mithril's staff shortage really shows here.

- You're free to replace me any time you want. I'd like to see you last more than five minutes.

- Yeah, I'd like to see you take my place. You'd probably wave your gun around, hesitating to choose a target, while your team gets shot to pieces. Then you'd be on the verge of tears and say: "oh, everyone, I'm so sorry!.." Pathetic.

[- I would suggest you to refrain from further arguments until after the operation, Sirs,] AI tried to interrupt them, but they ignored him.

- Conceited, as always. There's a lot of snipers like you out there.

- Su-ure, but brutes like you are a dime a dozen.

- Still better than sharpshooters who are better at using their mouth than their rifle.

- And you then? The virgin who always looks like he's got a toothache?

- You're being illogical.

- Wha-at?! Don't go acting high and mighty all of a sudden!!

This exchange would have continued for a while, but a woman's angry voice interrupted them.

- Cut it out! Both of you!!

It was, of course, the team leader, Melissa Mao.

- But, big sis, that guy--

- Mao, he was--

They answered at once, but their commander cut their protests short in a manner befitting a former Marine.

- Shut it! Do I have to tell you a second time?! If you want to go kill each other, as Al said, do it after the mission! You're not even blue-heads, you're more worthless than a puddle of lizard piss! I can't stand hearin' you maggots bicker - even if God'll forgive you, I won't!! And if I hear you squealin' like bitches in heat again, I swear, I'll drag you out of your cockpits, shit in your mouth and sew it shut!! You got that?!!

Her words reached their targets as surely as slugs from a heavy machine gun. They both could only mutter "Yes Ma'am" in response.

- Let's hear it - whom does your ass belong to??

- Sergeant Major Melissa Mao, Ma'am! - they answered in unison.

- Who's holding you by the balls??

- Sergeant Major Melissa Mao, Ma'am!

- Good. From now on, no talking crap, understand?..

Somehow, her words not only brought an end to the dispute, but also dispelled the heavy atmosphere in the hangar.

"Sheesh"

Mao closed the internal channel and sighed, then switched the comm dial on her left.

- Is everything all right there, Mao?

- I'm sorry, lieutenant, Sir. My brats here became bored and started playing. No more problems now.

- Ah, I see. Sounds like you're having a hard time there.

- Yes, Sir... It's like they... ahem, - she suddenly realised she was bother her superior with small complaints, and shook her head. - No, Sir, thank you, Sir. It's fine now. I'm sorry to bother you with this.

- I hope there will be no problems during the mission.

- Yes, Sir.

- The lives of twenty thousand people depend on it, you know.

- Acknowledged, Sir.

They were being flown to the Nabana republic, a small country near the equator, at the request of its elected president, who could not control his country's armed forces. It was a standard crisis situation: the military decided to conduct "counter-terrorist" operations in the territory of an ethnic minority. They were using a terrorist bombing in the capital as a pretext, but according to Mithril intelligence it was planned by the military themselves. The sixteenth regiment of the national army was about to enter the area. It was infamous for its previous actions, which involved anything from civilian massacres to illegal arms trade. On its invasion path was a refugee camp with around twenty thousand people, mostly from ethnic minorities, and they were now in danger because of the animosity of the army. Mao's unit was supposed to escort the refugees from the camp to the capital, where they would be under the protection of UN peacekeepers. Mithril's AS would first destroy a strategically placed bridge under the control of the national army, and then perform a raid on their advance party, causing confusion and panic, and making them retreat. Then they would be picked up by Mithril's transport helicopters (late, as usual) at a rendez-vous point in the northern part of the island. For Mao's unit it wasn't a particularly complicated operation. Even if the situation in itself was atrocious, it was a standard mission for them.

- Well, - continued the transport plane's first pilot, - I thought you "elite" SRT people were the cool and experienced veteran type?

- Well, normally that would be the case...

- What was that scene they made, then? Whatever's biting them might crawl over here. I won't even permit three hoodlums to land these machines, - do you know how much they cost? I won't allow any mistakes on this mission. Do you understand that?

- Yes, Sir! Understood, Sir!

- And this situation casts doubt on your ability to control your troops, as their commanding officer.

- Sir! I will strive to be a better commander! Sir!

Answered Mao in a grave voice. Inside her head, however, she was imagining walking into the unseen pilot's room, turning over his table, throwing a beer bottle at the wall and smashing the windows and tableware with a metal bat, shouting "I DON'T GIVE A FUCK!!"

Her feelings remained unknown to the first pilot, however, who concluded:

- If you understand, good. Consider this a reprimand.

Closing the channel, she sighed deeply. Why did she have to take the punishment for those two idiots? And then, they're going to be in danger, not that pilot, - what right has he got to say anything? Can he even imagine himself being in her position?! Aah... she didn't want to do it anymore. She was tired of being a senior non-com. Yes, she decided - she'll become another commissioned officer. A goddamn butter bar. She'd probably have to suck up to a couple of officers, but there wasn't any other way to get a second lieutenant grade... she heard this advice before, too. Second Lieutenant Melissa Mao... didn't sound too bad. She'd talk about it to Ben and the major after the operation. But then she remembered - yes, that would happen only after the operation, and she needed to concentrate on it.

She opened the internal comm channel. Complete silence - they were following her order, at least, but for some reason she felt a dangerously uneasy atmosphere. The conversation she interrupted was different from just another friendly squabble. They would usually make fun of each other's personality, yes - but never insult each other's abilities as a soldier. This could have a negative impact on their team chemistry.

"Should I slap some reason into them? There's still fifty minutes until drop..."

So now she has to play diplomat... God, so annoying... why does she have to do this? But there's no choice, right... Crap.

She decided she'd start with Kurz.

He was silently sulking in the cockpit of his M9, so opening a channel to him alone, she tried to get him to talk.

- Kurz... are you listening?..

Oh, sure, that violent woman now wants to talk about something? And she's using her sweet voice... what, will she now say "I'm sorry"? Damn, how many times have I already been manipulated by her this way... but this time it's different. It's that bastard's fault. I won't give in.

Thinking that, Kurz answered curtly:

- Huh? What?

- Come on, don't sit pouting in your corner like a kid...

- I'm not pouting, - muttered Kurz peevishly.

- If you really were mad, I wouldn't know what to do...

He thought he heard Mao sigh (or even sob?) on the other end of the line.

- Huh?..

- Please, don't be mad at me, okay?

Kurz switched to a voice that he thought sounded like a dependable comrade.

- Don't worry. It's fine.

- Really?..

- Sure. I'm cool, as always.

- Mm... thanks...

That went very fast. Kurz didn't understand that he was already dancing to her tune. He was, after all, part of that simple, single-celled half of humanity - that is, the males.

- Kurz... you understand my situation, don't you?..

- Yes, yes I do.

- I'm sorry you have to endure it... you're still holding a grudge against me, aren't you...

- No, no - I told you, it's fine.

- Ah... but, you know, keep our talk secret from Sousuke, ok?

- Sure, don't worry, I won't say anything.

Kurz's pride was now healed, and he felt somewhat superior to his partner. Bad luck, Sousuke - I got the consolation from Mao. And you- you're just a kid, after all. Hehehe...

- He's just a kid, I won't think too much of it.

- But... he really is good. You too, do you best, ok?

- Sure I will, but you know, - Kurz remembered something and his voice sounded sullen again.

- What is it?

- What I said earlier, it's true. There are plenty like him out there. He's too full of himself, - his words were dripping with poison.

He was definitely still angry about what happened earlier.

- Really?..

- You know, like they say - there's always a bigger fish. When I fought in the Middle East as a mercenary, I met an enemy once that was way better than him. Someone like Sousuke wouldn't be a problem for me, but that guy - his piloting was really something.

- Aah, I see...

She understood that this is where he was coming from. He had met an enemy that was much more skilled than Sousuke, and held off against him, so he thought he had the right to criticise Sousuke's combat skills.

- I remember it clearly. It was two years ago, in Lebanon. I was in a mercenary unit that was financed by a Western European corporation. We did have AS, even though they were second-generation. I was in the AS precision fire support team, - in the sniper platoon.

This was a year before he joined Mithril together with Sagara Sousuke. He almost never talked about his past career.

He was, then, attached to a mercenary unit that obviously did not have as many resources and high-tech equipment as Mithril. He then met and fought this enemy several times in the city that by then was transformed into ruins. He remembered fighting under a leaden sky, among burned-out cars, crumbling buildings and artillery craters; black smoke rising from the fires that no one would care to extinguish.

His AS, equipped with a Rheinmetall high-calibre sniper rifle, was on the rooftop of a six-storey building that somehow managed to survive the bombing raids. He was backing up the advance of an allied AS unit, spotting enemy units at a distance of up to five kilometres and destroying them with precise shots.

By that time Kurz had already developed his talent for sniping, and was considered the top in his unit, with or without AS.

Then he immediately spotted and shot down two machines. A third one engaged his unit, and he already had him in his sights. He only saw a small opening among the rubble, where the sensor of the other machine was visible, and he was already going to squeeze the trigger - but that third machine was the "problem enemy". As if he had eyes in the back of his head, he avoided Kurz's bullet at the last moment. Then without faltering for a second, even under fire from an unseen sniper, took care of two machines that were in Kurz's unit. His movements were extremely efficient and fluid. There weren't many places in the city ruins that were safe from the sniper - he understood it and took it all into account, engaging the enemy machines in melee, cunningly drawing them close and then finishing them off with his monomolecular cutter. He could disable his left arm, and then it was a lucky shot at the enemy's estimated position through a wall, despite the fact that the scene was covered in a cloud of dust.

The machine, with its left arm blown off by Kurz's extraordinary shot, seemed to be retreating. That is what it would normally do. An AS that received damage to one of the limbs would try to get back to base as quickly as possible. But not this one.

Instead, it began to approach Kurz's sniping position, using ruins to its advantage. Kurz changed his position and prepared an ambush - but so excellent was the enemy pilot's assessment of the terrain, that he avoided Kurz's traps easily. He had never met an enemy of such frightening intuition and skill.

The enemy had just appeared in the range of his gun, when suddenly friendly fire struck the building where Kurz was hiding. The unknown ace used the capabilities of his machine and the terrain fully to get to Kurz. But the latter was also an excellent soldier. He greeted the enemy with booby traps he had prepared beforehand.

The result was a draw. Kurz managed to damage the enemy AS' other arm, but he, too, practically ran out of ammunition for his sole weapon, and was forced to retreat.

- I've never seen him, and don't know his name, either, of course, - finished Kurz. - I only met him in Lebanon. But I've got to admit, I was... relieved. I really don't know if I could handle him a second time.

Mao was only playing along at first, but now she was genuinely surprised. The pilot had to be exceptional to corner Kurz Weber.

- If you at least knew his name...

- Yeah. I had spent some time in headquarters, even paid quite a sum to find any information about him, - answered Kurz very seriously.

- Dear me, that's one AS pilot I wouldn't want to make an enemy of.

- Well, it's what I've been trying to say. The world's a big place. Plenty of people better than Sousuke.

- Aha, - Mao, trying not to break the pace, followed up by an important question. - But, you know, I hope you won't suddenly forget to back us up because of this?

- Huh?! Of course not! - answered Kurz, sounding offended. - Gotta save that gloomy bastard's ass again. Gotcha, sis. He only pushed me too far this time, and I got pissed off, you know...

- Really?

- Yeah, yeah. Don't worry.

- Hm, okay, - her voice changed back to normal, and she cut the comm.

Switching channels to Sousuke this time, she thought that he also sounded really offended, so she had to take care of the problem quickly.

- Sousuke?

Silence.

- Are you listening?

Silence... then:

- Yes. What?

The answer was even more abrupt than usual.

- Come on, don't pout in your corner like a kid...

- I'm not pouting.

You too, thought Mao, hearing his voice - just like a spoiled child.

- Listen, you understand why I yelled at you like that, don't you? You know my position, and that Kurz is always like that... you're the only one I can rely on.

Silence.

- Sousuke?..

- Of course, I understand. I'm always causing you trouble, Mao.

- Thank you... but don't tell Kurz I said this, okay?

- Yes. I promise, - answered Sousuke, his voice clear and firm, unlike before.

Well, he was also a man... and so had some easily recognisable vain feelings.

- R-really?..

- Of course. Kurz is emotionally immature. But I'll bear with it.

- Thanks... but, you've got to recognise his skills, you know?

After she said, that, Sousuke answered her in the exact same tone that Kurz just a while ago.

- Hm. But...

- But, what?..

- As I said to him before, there are a lot of snipers like Kurz out there. He has too high an opinion of himself, - said Sousuke very bitterly.

He was definitely still angry from the recent argument.

- Ah, really...

- I'm not lying. As they say, there's always a bigger fish. When I was a mercenary in the Middle East, I once fought against a sniper that was far above Kurz. His skill was quite extraordinary, - as if lost in memories, muttered Sousuke.

Mao, on the other hand, was puzzled:

- Say, have you been-...

- I remember now. It was in Lebanon, two years ago. I was a member of a guerilla unit that was financed by some wealthy people. We had even Arm Slaves, though they were second generation only. Because of my valuable experience in Afghanistan, I was given one of the machines.

- Ah...

The next twenty minutes Mao listened to the same story that she heard from Kurz, but from the perspective of the "third machine".

- ... I was very close, - Sousuke's voice even got a little emotional while retelling that story. - I gave it my best, but couldn't reach him - he shot my right arm, and I had to retreat hastily. A frighteningly skilled man. I'm even grateful to him for not killing me there.

- I think that was because of a lack of ammo, not kindness...

- Sorry? What?

... Nothing, just talking to myself.

It was no use telling him now, so Mao feigned ignorance.

- ...anyway, people of that calibre exist, too. Extreme attention to detail, incredible concentration... and control, unlike Kurz. I wouldn't want to meet him on the battlefield again. On the other hand, if he was on my side, I'd trust him with my life.

- It's a small world...

- Sorry? What were you-...

- Nothing, don't worry, - muttered Mao, closing her eyes.

At that moment they heard the pilot's voice through the speakers in the cargo bay.

- This is the pilot speaking. We're approaching waypoint Hotel, altitude 5000. Opening hatch, you three better be ready.

- ...uh, yes, Urz 2, roger that! - replied Mao in confusion.

- Urz 6, got it!

- Urz 7, roger that.

The transport quivered as the rear cargo hatch began to open slowly. Brilliant, almost blinding sunlight filled the cargo hold as the plane shook in momentary turbulence.

- To all AS pilots. Skies are clear. Wind southwest, six knots...

Together with the pilot's voice, a stream of information came to the machine AIs through the datalinks.

- ...good luck out there.

- Thank you, Sir! Hear that, you brats?! - Mao shouted to the two others. They answered in unison
- the world's best combo who had no idea of their own worth.

- Urz 6, got that! Don't piss yourself on the way down, Sergeant Glum!

- Urz 7, roger that. Don't get in my way, maggot.

God, weren't they a bunch of troublesome brats! But now she didn't feel worried in the slightest.

- Yeah, OK - now, after me, you sorry bastards, or you wanna live forever?!

Mao flicked a switch, and the magnetic locks which held her AS in place disengaged. Her M9 slid on the rails of the cargo hold, and was thrown out into the sunlight.

//Gatoh Shoji

//trans. by MisterV, 2011